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COURSES IN ECONOMICS AND METHODS OF INSTRUCTION AT NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Economics is relatively a new subject in the curricula of colleges and universities. The subject, therefore, has not become so thoroughly standardized, either in content or in method of presentation, as those subjects that have longer held a place in the college curriculum. Not only that, but the constant increase in the number of students electing economics, the ever-expanding list of courses offered in the various institutions, and the growth in the number of instructors devoting themselves to the subject have been unprecedented. All of these circumstances contribute to the pedagogical problems which confront us as teachers of economics.

I need not discuss in this presence the attractiveness of economics as a field for speculation and scientific research. There are those, however, who doubt the possibility of developing in the field of the so-called social sciences a system of thought to which the term "science" can be accurately applied. As scientists we should at all times be jealous of our scientific reputation. I am convinced that most writers on economic topics have much to learn in the way of methods of investigation and of patience on the part of the investigator from our colleagues in other scientific fields. But as teachers we have another responsibility—one that has, in my judgment, received much less attention than the former, and much less than its merits deserve. We should be just as jealous of our reputation as teachers as we are of our scientific reputation. We owe it to the large number of students who are yearly passing through our courses that the character of instruction given shall be as truly educational as that of any other course in the curriculum. I am convinced that courses in economics, when properly handled, are just as effective in developing the powers of thought and logical processes as are mathematics or the sciences. It is the duty of the teacher of economics to organize

and to present the subject-matter of his courses in such a manner as to develop these powers in his students. Should an instructor fail in this particular, he has, in my judgment, failed as a teacher, however popular he may be, or however large may be his classes. I do not mean to imply that the teacher should be held responsible for the development of this faculty in every member of his classes; but if he does not get hold of a considerable number of students in a way to call forth their powers of logical analysis and constructive thought, he should be regarded as a second- or third-rate teacher.

In the foregoing statements I have very briefly set forth certain ideals which are largely personal, but which, I think I can truthfully say, have been in the minds of our instructional staff in the development and presentation of the work at Northwestern. Before proceeding to a detailed description of our methods of instruction, I wish to present certain matters which are perhaps peculiar in some respects to our own local problems, but which have had an influence on the nature of the courses that we offer. The work of the department of economics in the college of liberal arts and the economic courses in the school of commerce are handled by the same corps of instructors. The courses have been arranged so as to give us the most economical use of the instructor's time and energies. A large portion of the work of the school of commerce is in evening classes. Every member of the department gives one or more evening courses. The students in these classes are almost entirely young men, somewhat older than college students, who are engaged during the day in some line of business. We have proceeded on the assumption that the best service which we could render these men is to give them some understanding of the fundamental economic relations in the life about them. In other words, we have been teaching them the best economic principles that we know. Their needs and their interests have reacted upon the character of our courses and the general organization of our work. The minds of these men are filled with concrete experiences which they constantly demand to have explained in the light of the economic principles presented. As a rule, their illustrations are complicated, and many of them require a considerable

degree of familiarity on the part of the instructor with the business practice in the particular field from which the illustrations happen to be drawn. Recognizing the needs of these men, and because we are convinced that the procedure adopted is pedagogically sound, we have limited the field to be covered by an instructor, and arranged his teaching schedule so that he can repeat his courses in either the college or the day work in commerce and in the evening classes, thus enabling him to have the maximum time for specialization in a particular branch of economics. In this way we have attempted to make it possible for an instructor to become reasonably familiar with current business practice in his field.

When an addition has been made to our faculty, we have endeavored to get a man who has already established himself in the field we wished developed, or desires to work in this field. In addition to the specialization thus obtained, in certain fields, in which the information is less well standardized and accessible, we have given a man a very light teaching schedule, with the distinct purpose of permitting him sufficient time to make first-hand investigation of the subject to which he is assigned. To be specific, this method was followed in the fields of business organization and factory management, as well as to a less extent in certain other subjects. The teaching schedules of these men have later been brought up to normal either by the repetition of the courses developed or by taking on new work. The content and method of presentation of all of our courses have been influenced by our experience with the problems which I have just reviewed. The organization of the work has had, as I shall later attempt to show, a distinct influence in stimulating research among our students.

At this point the question may be raised whether we have not developed specialization at the expense of unity in our curriculum and in the interests and information of the teaching staff. On the contrary, I think we have, in the main, forestalled any danger along this line by our faculty conferences. We have devoted a good deal of time to the discussion of our local problems, and have given considerable thought to the best methods of dovetailing our courses to prevent undue duplication. In these conferences much of the specialized information which any instructor has obtained becomes

more or less the common property of the group. Our accountants have participated in these conferences, to the mutual advantage, I think, of the accountants and of those of us who know little or nothing of accounting practice. Many useful illustrations have been drawn from the experience of these men in their work in business houses.

One further general statement should be made. We have no separate department of sociology, and all courses offered in this subject are given in the department of economics. There are three classes of students who are interested in social questions: young men who look forward to some form of social work, those preparing for the ministry, and most of the young women who have the courage to elect a major in economics. We attempt to give these students the best work which our resources will permit.

We have two general faculty regulations that not only affect the organization of the work in a department, but also govern the program of study of the student. In the first place, we require all students, as a condition for graduation, to make what we call a *major* in some department. In addition to a major, two *minors* are required, one of which must be correlated to the major subject, while the other may be in any subject selected by the student. The major and minor requirements are designed to accomplish the same purpose as the group system. The major requirement differs slightly in different departments, depending on the question of whether or not Freshman courses are counted toward the major. In those departments in which a course open to Freshmen is counted toward the major the minimum requirement is twenty-four semester-hours. In other departments the requirement is twenty semester-hours. No department can require less than the minimum indicated, but may require more. While we belong in the second group of departments, we require twenty-two semester-hours for a major in economics.

The minor requirements are of less importance for my purpose, but a brief description of them will be helpful in making a complete presentation of our situation. In general, a minor consists of two three-hour year-courses in a single department. The correlated minor is determined by the department, subject to faculty

approval. The subjects that are closely related to the work in the major department are published, so that the student knows in what fields it will be necessary to make his correlated minor. The theory is, however, that the faculty adviser, who must approve the student's program, will select that subject which fits best into the work the student has done, or plans to do. It will be seen that election of courses by the student is materially restricted by this regulation, and the adviser, who is usually head of the department in which the student is making a major, has greater freedom in planning the student's work. The second minor is entirely within the control of the student. It will be seen, however, that the effect of the minor requirements is to reduce the number of introductory courses that a student may carry. It has increased the registration of students quite materially in the more advanced courses.

The second regulation pertains to the grading of courses within a department. The rule provides: (1) courses which may be entered without prerequisite in the department; (2) courses which may be taken only after, or concurrently with, an introductory course; (3) courses which may be taken only after, or concurrently with, a course in the second group; (4) courses which may be taken only after, or concurrently with, a course of the third group. While the practice is not entirely uniform, it is quite common to designate these various groups as A, B, C, and D courses. In our department Economics A, which is prerequisite for all but one course in the more advanced groups, cannot be entered until the Sophomore year. It will therefore be seen that the courses which I am to describe are open only to Juniors and Seniors. As a result of these regulations, the students in our B-, C-, and D-group courses are in the main those who have chosen economics for a major. They are, in other words, specializing under direction in these subjects, and by the Senior year, if a student has been regular in meeting his previous requirements, he can now devote a large amount of time to his major subject.

In addition to the regulation which I have described, let me say that it is our practice to keep our eyes on any man of real promise. When a man has made an excellent record in the general

introductory course, he is watched carefully in his subsequent work. If he shows up well in the more advanced courses, some member of the department is likely to have a talk with him to find out his plans and ambitions. If he is interested in economics and business subjects, he is advised as to the best course to follow in order to accomplish his purposes. If he shows sufficient promise, we encourage him to try his hand with some problem in our seminar. By means of this personal touch we have got hold of some very good men and have directed them into channels that appealed to their interests and at the same time tested their abilities. Some of them, instead of following the normal course of simply graduating, have become interested in the serious problems of our industrial life, and are now devoting their energies to such contributions to the solutions of these problems as they are able to make.

The number of students in the B- and C-group courses is not so large as to prevent the teacher from coming into close touch with every member in the class. The size of our classes has not only made possible the personal relation between the instructor and the student, but it has also enabled us to limit to its rightful place the lecture method of presenting a subject. The instructor can at all times satisfy himself that his students are working from day to day instead of postponing the work till the end of the semester. A number of devices are used to keep the student constantly at his assigned tasks. Some of our men require frequent short papers or tests written during the class hour on some point covered by the reading. In some courses a term paper is required. An endeavor is made in the assignment of these papers to see that the topic shall have an intimate bearing upon the development of the course. While the practice is not identical in the various courses, I think I can illustrate what I mean by citing what I required in my course on labor legislation last year. The subject was treated topically, and I required each student to look up the legislation in some state, preferably his home state, on the topic under discussion, and to hold himself in readiness to report during the class hour the information he had found on the topic assigned him. At the end of the semester he was required to bring in all the information which he had collected in the form of a report, and

was then required to compare the laws of the topics covered with standard laws on the same subject, whenever such existed. Reports as here described differ greatly from the so-called "term thesis." I have little faith in a "thesis" if it is used simply as a device to secure additional work from the student. But I do believe that the use of reports which have an intimate bearing on the development of the course is helpful, not only to the student making the report, but to the balance of the class as well. The student becomes acquainted with sources of information, and he gets into the habit of turning to these sources when he wishes additional information along the same line.

This completes what I wish to say concerning the methods of treating our B- and C-group courses. There remains the seminar to which Seniors may be admitted, subject to the approval of the department. A Senior who has completed three year-courses in the department may be admitted to this course, but in order to be admitted he must have a previous good record. Furthermore, he can register for only three year-hours of credit, except by permission of the faculty, which in practice means the recommendation of the department. We do not recommend a man for this amount of credit unless we are perfectly satisfied with his previous record.

Our experience with this course may be of sufficient interest to this group to warrant a detailed description of the methods which we employ in conducting it. It is in this course that we give our students a chance to test their abilities to the full, and our experience with the men who have undertaken the work has convinced us of the educational value of a course of this character as a means of developing our students. The purpose of the course is to give training in methods of constructive investigation and research.

Our method of conducting the course is as follows: The course is under the direction of one member of the faculty who has general supervision of the work of those registered for it. The information, suggestions, and criticisms of every member of the department, however, is brought to bear on the work of students in a manner which I shall describe presently. The first task is the choice of a subject for investigation. There was a time when we had hopes of selecting a single topic for the seminar and of allotting portions

of it to the different students in the course. But the diversity of interests between biblical students and commerce men has caused us to abandon this dream of unity in the work. Consequently, we now follow the practice of choosing topics in certain fields—as money and banking, labor, corporation finance, public service corporations, taxation, etc. In choosing a topic, two tests are applied: first, Is the topic of such a character that it can be worked by the particular student in question? secondly, Is information sufficiently accessible to enable the student to cover the ground with reasonable adequacy in the time at his disposal? We are more concerned that a question shall measure up satisfactorily to these two tests than we are about the particular subject investigated. We tell our men over and over again that the real benefit which they may expect from the course is not the information they may gain in the specialized field studied, but the knowledge and training in methods of research—how to locate information, how to collect and organize it, and how to present conclusions drawn in a scientific manner. This is the chief purpose of the course and it is kept constantly in mind in assigning the topics for investigation.

When a student has been assigned a topic, he is told that he may expect to receive expert criticisms and suggestions from the instructor who is specializing in the field from which the topic has been chosen. For instance, if a topic in money and banking is assigned, the student is turned over to the instructor in this subject. As indicated above, the division of the work of our instructional staff, theoretically at least, puts each man in a position to give the student assigned to him the most competent direction in his field. I am satisfied that this situation has been largely responsible for the character of the research work which our students have done. For the ordinary tools and methods of investigation that are fairly common to all topics the student looks to the instructor in charge of the course. Weekly reports of progress are required, first on general readings, later on grasp of subject, plan of treatment and organization, and presentation of materials.

The work on the topic may be divided into three periods. The first is the time during which the student is getting acquainted with

his topic and the general field in which it is found. Usually the student is required at the outset to do a considerable amount of general reading in the subject from which his topic is taken. The length of time devoted to this part of the work varies with different students according to their previous acquaintance with the field, the nature of the problem, as well as the rapidity with which they take to work of this character. Not infrequently we have found that men who had excellent records in their regular courses would flounder about in a surprising manner. Some men have been so completely swamped, when thrown on their own responsibilities, that they have been unable to live up to their promise. In fact, we never feel confident that we have taken the full measure of a man until we have seen his reactions while he is developing a piece of research work.

The second stage is the planning of the thesis. After the student has been reading both general and special information long enough to conceive the problem, he is required to present in rough outline a plan of treatment. In presenting his plan he must be prepared to defend the organization which he has worked out. When a student has reached this stage, we arrange a general meeting of the seminar, at which all members of our group are present and take part in criticizing the plan of study proposed. This is the most important stage in the development of his work. To conceive a problem, to organize it into a logical treatment, is one of the most difficult tasks which a student has to learn. Ordinarily, he gets very little training of this kind in his regular courses, and for that reason we feel that a course of this character serves a very useful purpose, especially for the best students. The last stage is the filling in of the plan—the organization and presentation of the information collected. Often this becomes little more than a drill in advanced composition. General meetings of the seminar, at which all members of the department are present, are held about once a month. In this way the student gets the benefit of criticisms from many angles. Frequently, it is true, the student is overwhelmed by the difficulties which such a meeting brings out. It then becomes the duty of the instructor in charge to furnish some degree of encouragement and to hold the student to his task. If

the man has the right stuff in him, he will set to work and overcome the difficulties raised and will be the stronger for his efforts.

In conclusion, let me say that we have not attempted to do much more than one year of graduate work. We have, however, in the manner which I have just described, attempted to give our students some real training in research methods, so that, in case they continue their graduate studies for a higher degree, they will be prepared to work effectively on any subsequent piece of investigation assigned them. If they do not continue their graduate work, the training received will be a useful asset in any intellectual work which they may later wish to pursue.

APPENDIX I

The list of courses which we offer, either annually or in alternate years is given below by titles and groups:

ECONOMICS, FINANCE, AND ADMINISTRATION

Major: Course A and sixteen (eighteen, if Course AA is included) semester-hours, including at least six semester-hours more advanced than the courses in the B group.

Minor: Course A and six semester-hours as advanced as the courses in the B group.

AA—*Economic History*. 3 hours

Open to all students. For Juniors and Seniors, and for a Major, this course will bear but two year-hours of credit.

A—*The Elements of Economics*. 3 hours

Open to Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors. Credit is not given unless the full course is completed.

B1—*Money and Banking*. 3 hours

Open to students who have completed Course A. May well be preceded by Course AA.

B2—*Labor Problems and Trade Unionism*. 3 hours

Open to students who have completed Course A.

B3—*Corporation Finance*. (First Semester.) 3 hours

Open to students who have completed Course A.

B4—*Principles of Sociology*. 3 hours.

Open to students who have completed Course A.

B5—*Present-Day Social and Industrial Problems*. 3 hours

Open to students who have completed Course A, and, at the discretion of the instructor, to Juniors and Seniors who have completed a course in history or philosophy.

*B6—*Elements of Public Finance; State and Local Taxation.* 3 hours

Open to students who have completed Course A.

B7—*Industrial Relations.* 3 hours

Open to students who have completed Course A.

C2—*Public Utilities.* 2 hours

Open to students who have completed a course in the B group.

*C4—*Labor Conditions and Labor Legislation.* 3 hours

Open to students who have completed or are taking a course in the B group.

C7—*Principles of Public Finance and Taxation.* 3 hours

Open to students who have completed or are taking a course in the B group.

C8—*Social and Economic Reforms.* (First Semester.) 3 hours

Open to students who have completed or are taking a course in the B group.

C9—*Value and Distribution.* (Second Semester.) 3 hours

Open to students who have completed a course in the B group.

Required of graduate students in the department who are candidates for the degree of Master of Arts.

C10—*Investments.* (Second Semester.) 3 hours

Open to students who have completed Course B3.

C11—*Transportation and Rate-Making.* 3 hours

Open to students who have completed Course B3.

*C12—*Trusts and Government in Industry.* 3 hours

Open to students who have completed Course B3.

C14—*Special Problems in Social Betterment.* (Second Semester.) 2 hours

Open to students who have completed Course B4 or B5.

C15—*Statistics and Statistical Methods.* (Second Semester.) 4 hours

Open to students who have completed or are taking a course in the B group.

C16—*Principles of Business and Commercial Organization.* 3 hours

Open to students who have completed a year-course in the B group.

D—*Seminar.* 3-6 hours

Open to graduate students and to Seniors with the approval of the department.

F. S. DEIBLER

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

*Starred courses are not given in 1916-17.